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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City to determine if minority students were at greater risk for dropping out, to explore student experiences, and to evaluate existing support services. The survey consisted of telephone interviews conducted with 431 Caucasian and 360 ethnic minority students enrolled at the graduate and undergraduate levels at the University of Utah during spring 1990. Two versions of the telephone questionnaire were developed, based on a student's ethnic minority or Caucasian status. Ethnic minorities included Asian, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students. Additional follow-up analysis was conducted during winter quarter 1992. Students reported on involvement in campus activities; interactions with other students, faculty, and staff; occurrence of ethnic prejudice and discrimination; academic experiences; utilization of support programs; and obstacles faced by minority students. Findings indicated that respondents' ethnicity was related to experiences of prejudice and discrimination, consideration of withdrawal from the university, and perceptions of academic success. Respondents who appeared to be at greater risk for contemplating withdrawl were those who lived alone, were African American or Native American, had a lower grade point average, were not using student services or were dissatisfied with the services, and were out-of-state Humanities majors. Results of a 2-year follow up survey found that of those who said they had contemplated withdrawal, only 53 percent were still registered, a significantly lower rate than those who had not considered withdrawal. Included are 4 figures and 23 references. (JB)

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Ethnic Minority and Caucasian Student Experiences at the University of Utah and Recommendations for Institutional Response

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Jean Endo
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Abstract

A survey was conducted to determine if minority students were at greater risk for "drop-out," to explore student experiences, and to evaluate existing support services. Students reported involvement in campus activities, interactions with other students, faculty and staff, occurrence of ethnic prejudice and discrimination, academic experiences, utilization of support programs, and obstacles faced by minority students. Findings indicate that experiences of prejudice and discrimination, consideration of withdrawal from the University and perceptions of academic success were all related to respondent ethnicity. Recommendations were made to re-assess existing student support programs, review curricula and institute additional support programs.

Ethnic Minority and Caucasian Student Experiences at the University of Utah and Recommendations for Institutional Response

Since the mid-seventies, research has indicated a difference in retention and attrition rates for ethnic minority students compared to their white counterparts (Astin, 1985; Avakian, MacKinney, & Allen 1982; Sedlacek & Pelham 1976). African American students in particular, especially at predominantly white institutions, tend to be at greater risk for disengagement (Fleming, 1984; Goodrich 1978, Rugg, 1982; Sedlacek & Webster 1978). Wilson and Melendez (1986) report that from 1981 to 1985 only 32.1% of African American students continued to be enrolled or graduated, compared to 50.1% of the non-minority cohort by the fall of 1985.

It is understandable why students might drop out of school when confronted with academic difficulties, but researchers have demonstrated that elements other than academic reasons influence student withdrawal. Suen (1983) and Fleming (1984) report that African American students express feelings related to greater levels of alienation and isolation. For ethnic minority students, factors such as the degree to which students identify with the campus (Fleming, 1984), their participation in activities and programs (Astin, 1975), and a need for social "success experiences" leading to increased integration and involvement in social or academic life at a university (Tinto, 1975) affect the probability that students will remain enrolled.

In addition to academic performance, Aitken (1982) found that satisfaction with a residential living experience was one of the best predictors of student persistence in school. Astin (1980) reported that residential students were more likely to persist than commuter students. Research by Stewart (1977) into housing issues indicated that African American

students perceived miscommunication and lack of trust as sources of racism in predominantly white institutions and residence halls.

Even though African American students might experience additional alienation and isolation in a predominantly white residence hall, research into the relationship of residence and student persistence conducted by Galicki and McEwen (1989) suggests that students, African American and white, seem to benefit from a residential living experience. Though no significant interaction effect between race and residency was evident in the study, they found that African American commuters had the lowest persistence rate (45.5%) followed by white commuters (60.8%), African American residents (70.4%) and white residents (80.6%).

Suen (1983) suggests that in order to reduce African American student attrition, programs should focus on reducing feelings of social estrangement, improving academic performance, and decreasing feelings of meaninglessness. Suen recommends a multidimensional approach to intervention through tutorial assistance, intensive orientation, career guidance, peer counseling, and group activities.

In a similar study of Native American students, LaCounte (1987) asserts that it is critical to understand the unique social, academic, and developmental needs of Native American students in order to formulate proactive retention strategies at the college/university level. Native American students are generally poorly prepared academically, entering higher education with poor high school records or GEDs, with low aspirations, with little knowledge of career opportunities and with relatively uneducated parents. Further, they generally come from rural and impoverished environments, and enter college at a relatively older age. Given all these factors, LaCounte (1987) suggests several retention strategies, including orientation, academic and career advising, monitoring academic progress, tutorial supports, financial aid, peer

counseling, student organizations, cultural events, and opportunities for informal socializing with faculty and staff.

Giles-Gee (1989) employed a multimethod approach of intervention -- faculty advising, study skills training, and workshops offered by tutorial services -- to improve academic performance and retention for African American students. Though the sample size was small, there appeared to be a negative relationship between grade point average (GPA) and commuting for African American students. Off campus employment and involvement in outside organizations also seemed to have a negative effect on GPA for African American students. Becerra (1991) found that factors such as facing discrimination and being in a predominantly white environment were not rated as foremost concerns by the majority of African American students when polled about obstacles to academic performance. Students reported that the academic transitions from high school with factors such as learning new studying skills, managing time and money were greater obstacles for them to overcome.

According to Mallinckrodt (1988) retention may be influenced by different factors for African American students than for white students. Support from members of the campus community may be most critical to African American students, whereas support from family members appears to be most salient for white students. Mallinckrodt suggests programs that focus on concrete survival skills, as well as groups to provide peer support and increased feelings of social support might be most effective in assisting African American students adjust to college.

In addition to attracting qualified ethnic minority students to campus, retention until graduation is a problem at the University of Utah. For example, in a recent report of students entering the University during any quarter of 1984-85 and graduated by the

fall of 1990, only 22% of the African American students and 0% of the Native American students graduated compared to 33% of all students graduating (Oyler, 1992). To better understand some of the factors contributing to the low retention rates, a survey was conducted from a sample of Caucasian and ethnic minority students. The purpose of this research was to examine the experiences of ethnic minority students compared to the student population in general at the University of Utah, to gather additional data on retention rates, and to assess the resources that might be available for support and retention of ethnic minority students.

The University of Utah is located in Salt Lake City, Utah. The population of the state is mostly Caucasian (93.8%), with 0.7% African Americans, 1.9% Asians, 4.9% Hispanics and 1.4% Native Americans (Utah Office of Planning and Budget, Demographic and Economic Analysis, 1991). About 60% of the population are members of the Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS).

During the 1989-90 academic year, there were 1314 ethnic minority students (excluding international students), or 5.6% of student enrollment. In a student population of 23,543, there were 577 Asian Americans (2.5%), 481 Hispanics (2.0%), 133 African Americans (0.6%), and 123 Native Americans (0.5%).

In addition to standard demographic information, students were asked to report on their involvement in campus activities, their perceptions of interactions among ethnic groups on campus, their interactions with faculty members, and the occurrence of ethnic prejudice and discrimination both on campus and in the Salt Lake City community. In addition, students were asked to report on their academic experiences, their utilization of various support programs, their perceptions of obstacles faced by ethnic minority students, and whether they and/or their friends have considered withdrawing from the University.

Methods and Definitions

Sample

The survey consisted of telephone interviews conducted with 431 Caucasian and 360 ethnic minority students enrolled at the University of Utah during Spring Quarter, 1990. The two samples were obtained via random sampling from the University of Utah student database Master Academic Record System (MARS) system and includes graduate and undergraduate students. The MARS database consists of information provided by students at their time of first registration; and the database is updated term by term. Two versions of the telephone questionnaire were developed, based on a student's ethnic minority or Caucasian status. Students were routed to either the ethnic minority or Caucasian version of the questionnaire based on information in the MARS system.

The ethnic minority group included Asian, African American or Black, Hispanic, and Native American students. Pacific Islanders were considered Asian for these purposes. The Caucasian group consisted of everyone else (Caucasian, missing data, etc.). All respondents in the Caucasian group were asked an initial ethnic status screening question that further ensured respondents were routed to the appropriate version of the questionnaire. Respondents who self identified as Asian, Pacific Islander, Black or African American, and Native American, who were not so categorized in the MARS database, completed the ethnic minority version of the questionnaire. In addition, all students who reported they were some combination of ethnic origins that included one of the ethnic minority designations were also routed to the ethnic minority questionnaire. In the case of discrepancies between the MARS information and the information provided at the time of the survey, the information provided by respondents to the survey was used.

There were 968 students contacted by interviewers, and 842 respondents, for a response rate of 88%. A maximum of nine follow-up calls were made to respondents in the Caucasian sample. Due to the limited number of students in the ethnic minority student samples, no limit was placed on the maximum number of follow-up calls that would be made to a potential subject. When a number was disconnected in the ethnic minority samples, attempts were made to trace the respondent through the Center for Ethnic Student Affairs and other campus organizations.

Every effort was made to avoid introduction of bias into the results of the survey. All telephone interviews were conducted in a centralized interviewing facility under direct and constant supervision. Telephone surveys were programmed and the survey design was implemented on a computer-assisted survey execution system (CASES). CASES provides the opportunity to have microcomputers impose quality control measures onto the data collection process. Each interviewer successfully completed a four stage training process that spans approximately twenty-four hours of actual training, and covers interviewing fundamentals, computer-assisted interviewing, and the specifics of a given survey.

To determine if there were differences in retention for students involved in the initial survey, additional follow-up analysis was conducted during winter quarter, 1992. Graduate students and students graduating subsequent to the initial survey were eliminated prior to analysis of the data. A variety of questions were addressed. Do ethnicity, grades, perceptions of success, consideration of withdrawal, or reported experiences of prejudice and discrimination affect retention? Is there a difference in GPA between students currently enrolled and those who have withdrawn?

Data Analysis

The Chi-Square statistic was used to detect relationships between variables and was considered to be significant at the .05 level. In addition, multi-variate loglinear analysis was run on the data as were various cross tabs, and qualitative statements were analyzed for content.

Results

Demographics

The responses of 774 students were utilized in the analysis. Of these, 428 (55%) self-identified as Caucasian, 120 (16%) as Hispanic, 112 (15%) as Asian or Pacific Islander, 63 (8%) as African American, and 51 (7%) as Native American.

Respondents ranged in age from under 18 to over 30. Eleven percent of the respondents were less than 20 years old, nearly half (45%) were aged 20 to 24, 20% were aged 25 to 29, and 23% were 30 years of age or older. Students in the various ethnic groups were somewhat unevenly distributed across age groupings. Asian students were more heavily represented than students of other ethnic categories in the 20 to 24 age bracket, while Native American students were over-represented in the 30 and over group.

There were also major differences in the living arrangements of students across ethnic categories. While only 8% of the entire sample lived on campus, nearly 24% of the African American students lived in residence halls. While 31% of all students lived with their parents, only 13% of African American and 10% of the Native American students reported living with their parents. With regard to living arrangements, 16% of the overall sample reported living with roommates, whereas 37% of the African American students and 24% of the Native American students did so. In general, only 10% of the respondents reported living alone; for African American and Native American students the incidence was higher at 25% and 14%, respectively.

Prejudice and Discrimination

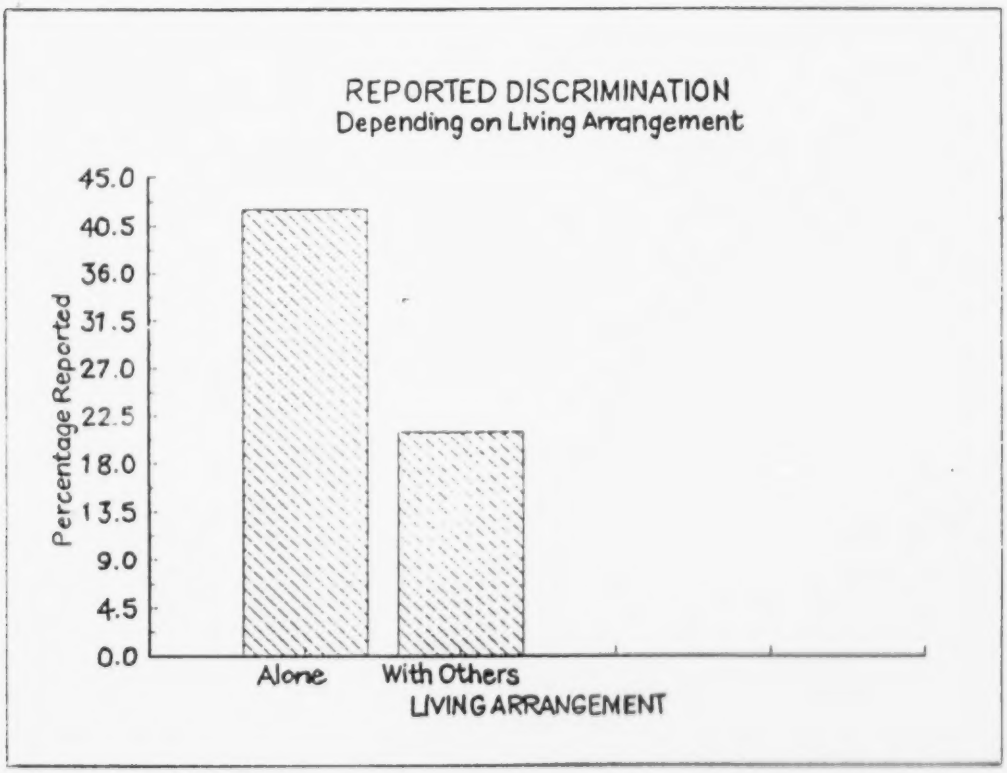
More than two thirds (68%) of respondents indicated that ethnic prejudice and discrimination occur at the University at least sometimes. While only 12% of the overall sample indicated that discrimination was a frequent event on campus, 32% of the African Americans, 19% of the Native Americans, 17% of the Hispanic, 9% of the Asian, and 8% of the Caucasian reported this to be the case. Twenty-one percent of the overall sample reported personal experience with discrimination and prejudice on campus, with African Americans more likely (37%) and Caucasians less likely (16%) to report personal experience. Thirty-six percent of the reported incidents took place in the classroom, 51% involved other students, and 24% involved faculty. Forty-two percent of the overall sample reported personal experience with prejudice and discrimination off campus, with ethnic minority students in all categories more likely to report such experiences than Caucasians.

The reported experience of prejudice and discrimination is related to age. The older a respondent is, the more likely they are to report incidents of discrimination. For respondents under 20 years of age, 19% of them said they had experienced discrimination, compared to 43% for students 30 years old and above. As noted previously, ethnic minority respondents in general reported a greater incidence of prejudice and discrimination, with African American respondents most likely to report such incidents.

Graduate student respondents reported a much greater incidence of discrimination (50%) than did undergraduate students (20%). As would be expected, graduate respondents were generally older than undergraduate respondents.

Respondents who reported living alone indicated a greater incidence of prejudice and discrimination, 42% compared to 21%, than those who lived with their family or someone else (See figure 1).

Figure 1



Reported Discrimination Based on Living Arrangements

Respondents with a higher GPA who reported living alone were more likely to express experiences of discrimination (37%) than otherwise (19%). Respondents reporting experiences of prejudice and discrimination on campus were more likely to also report experiencing discrimination off campus. This effect was somewhat more likely if a respondent's grades were higher. Gender was not found to be a predictor of reported discrimination.

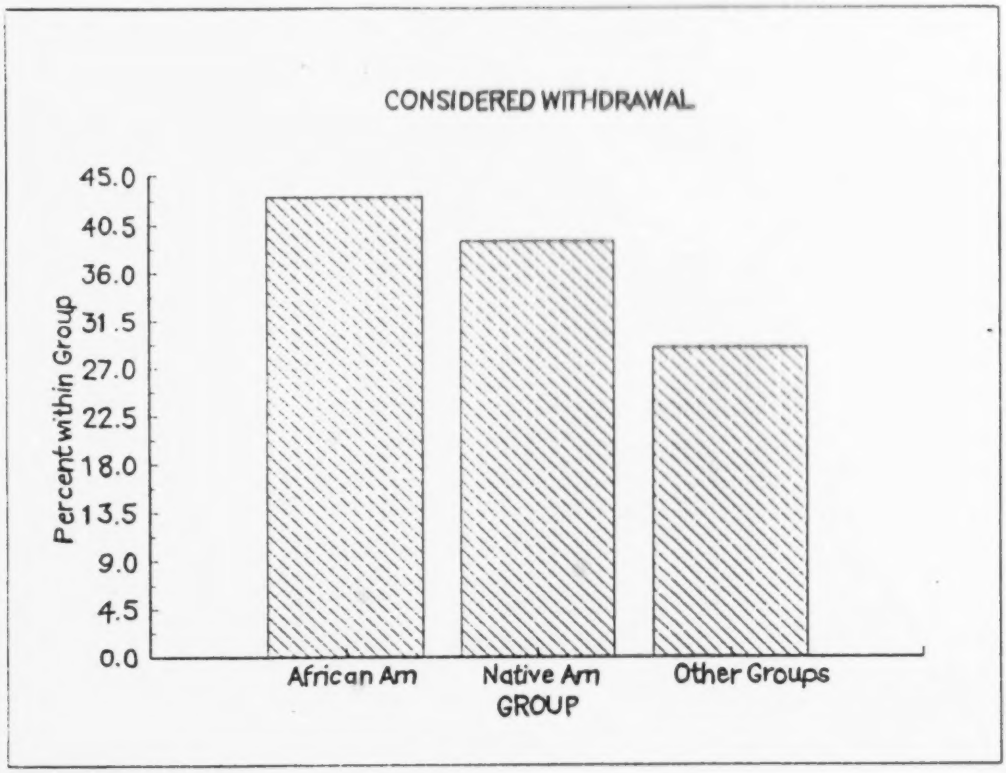
Respondents who felt there was prejudice and discrimination on campus were asked, "What do you think is the primary cause?" (of ethnic prejudice and discrimination). Some of their responses focused on lack of cultural information. For example, "Lack of understanding - the differences and similarities between minority and white students. People judge people on the basis of the whole minority rather than on the basis of an individual." Other comments expressed attitudes of racism and prejudice, such as, "Preconceived ideas - societal values and stereotypes; comes from the parents teaching and actions." Other comments centered on language and cultural barriers, such as, "... for example, in the American Indian world it is rude to look at someone while talking to them and in a Caucasian world it is rude not to look at someone while they are speaking. Things like this are interpreted by others."

Retention

Respondents were asked if they had ever considered withdrawing from the University. African Americans (43%) and Native Americans (39%) were most likely to respond affirmatively, compared to 29% overall (See figure 2). Asian American students were less likely to report thoughts of withdrawal (20%). These differences were statistically significant.

Various combinations of variables in addition to ethnic background were examined to determine if other factors were associated with consideration of withdrawal. It was found that consideration of withdrawal was not related to a respondent's age, sex, or experience of prejudice and discrimination on or off campus. If a respondent indicated that they lived alone, and had a lower GPA, they were more likely to consider withdrawal (47%) from the University than students whose grades were poor and lived with either parents or a roommate (33%).

Figure 2.



Comparison of Students Considering Withdrawal

It was also found that respondents reporting satisfaction with the service from staff at Tutorial Services were less likely to consider withdrawing (70%). Whereas, respondents who rated service from staff in Academic Advising and Office of the Registrar as poor, were more likely to consider withdrawal.

When comparing majors and residency with a respondent's thoughts of withdrawal, it was found that out-of-state Humanities majors were more likely to consider withdrawing from the University (42%) than any other state and major combination (30%). African American

(68%) and Native American (59%) respondents were more likely to be out-of-state students than the population in general (35%).

Respondents were asked to, "Please tell me the primary reason you have considered withdrawing from the University." Some statements reflected personal concerns, such as, "Stress - not being able to focus my energy in my classes and being overwhelmed by all the requirements." Other statements expressed a dissatisfaction with the University, for example, "Difficulty of trying to make it through a program when the scheduling made it impossible for me to take classes." Academic concerns were reflected in comments such as, "There is not enough emphasis on helping students get though a course as opposed to giving hard tests and weeding them out."

Academic Success

Respondents were also asked to rate the success of their academic achievement at the University of Utah. Overall, about 72% of the respondents felt their academic achievement was either successful or very successful, 26% thought their achievement was fair, while only 3% rated their achievement as unsuccessful or very unsuccessful. Self-ratings of academic success were strongly related to respondent ethnicity.

Compared to the overall 3% unsuccessful rating, Native American students were more likely to rate their academic success as unsuccessful (10%) and less likely to evaluate their achievement as successful (45%). Caucasians were more likely to rate themselves as successful (82%), while African Americans (49%) and Asians (59%) were less likely to do so.

Cross tabs were used to examine actual GPA data for the respondents from the MARS system. Respondents perceptions of academic success correlates fairly well with actual GPA except for Asian respondents whose perceptions of success were lower than their rankings within

the quartiles. About fifty percent of Asian, Caucasian and Hispanic respondents had better than a 2.89 average, while only twenty five percent of the African American and Native American respondents achieved at this level.

Respondents were asked, "Are there any other comments or suggestions you would like to make that could enhance our efforts to increase student retention and satisfaction at the University?" Responses included increased minority recruitment efforts on the high school level, additional academic and financial support, expanded opportunities for social and cultural activities, and courses that address ethnic issues. Overwhelmingly both Caucasian (46%) and minority respondents (36%) indicated that there should be increased ethnic education. Respondents suggested that ethnic studies classes should be required of all students, the curriculum should be changed in classes to reflect the contribution of minorities, faculty and students need to be made aware of minority student needs and cultural differences, and better opportunities for minorities to be integrated into the main stream.

Summary

Respondents appear to be at greater risk for contemplating withdrawal if they:

- Live alone
- Are African American or Native American
- Have a lower GPA
- Are not using student services (Tutoring) -- or are dissatisfied with the services (Academic Advising and Registrar)
- And are out-of-state Humanities majors

Respondents indicating greater incidence of racial prejudice and discrimination:

- Live alone

- Have a higher GPA
- Are older
- Are African American and Native American

Respondents at risk for academic difficulty

- African American
- Native American

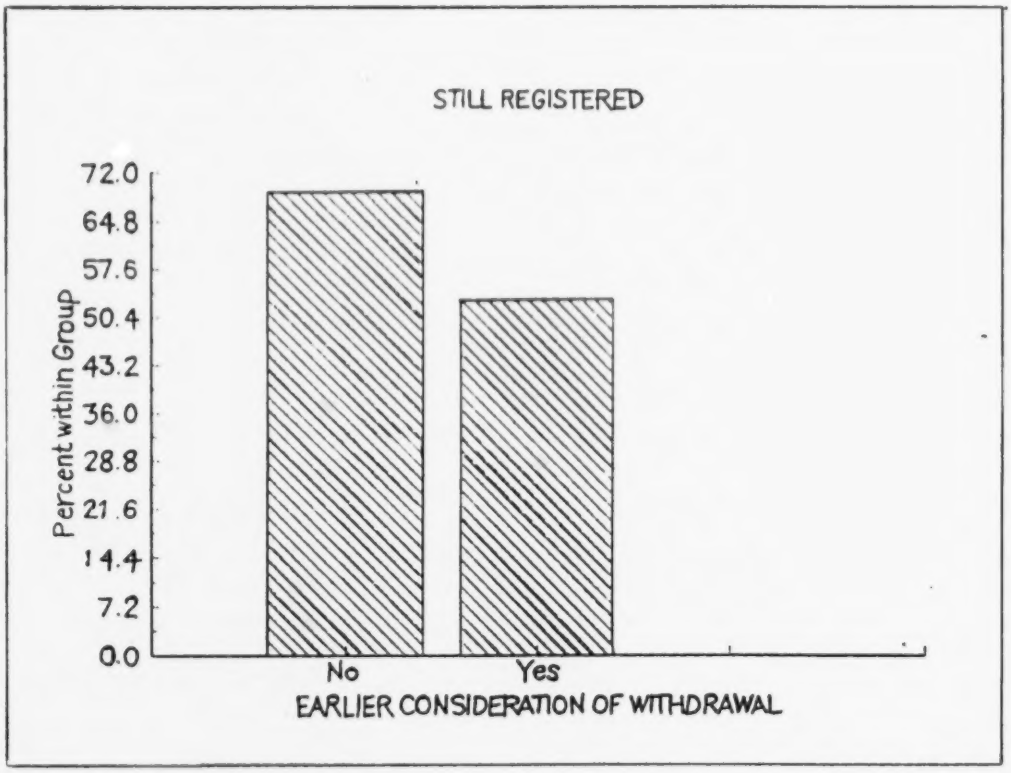
Follow-up Retention Information

Two years following the initial survey, additional information was compiled on participants to determine retention. More than two-thirds (69%) of the undergraduate students who reported they had not considered withdrawal from the University were still registered (See figure 3). Of the students reporting they had considered withdrawal, only 53% were still registered. This difference is statistically significant.

Of students who responded that they considered themselves academically successful, 70% were still registered, compared to 55% of those who had perceived themselves as only fairly successful or unsuccessful.

There is a strong correlation between grades and retention two years later. Only 44% of students who had GPAs between 2.00 and 2.4 were still registered, compared to 74% for students with a GPA of 2.4 and above. There is a significant difference in GPA by ethnicity for students not registered. The GPA for Asian, Caucasian and Hispanic students is above the 2.0 level necessary to be considered a student in good standing (2.52, 2.59, and 2.33); whereas, the GPA for African Americans (1.76) and Native Americans (1.94) not currently registered is below the requisite 2.0.

Figure 3



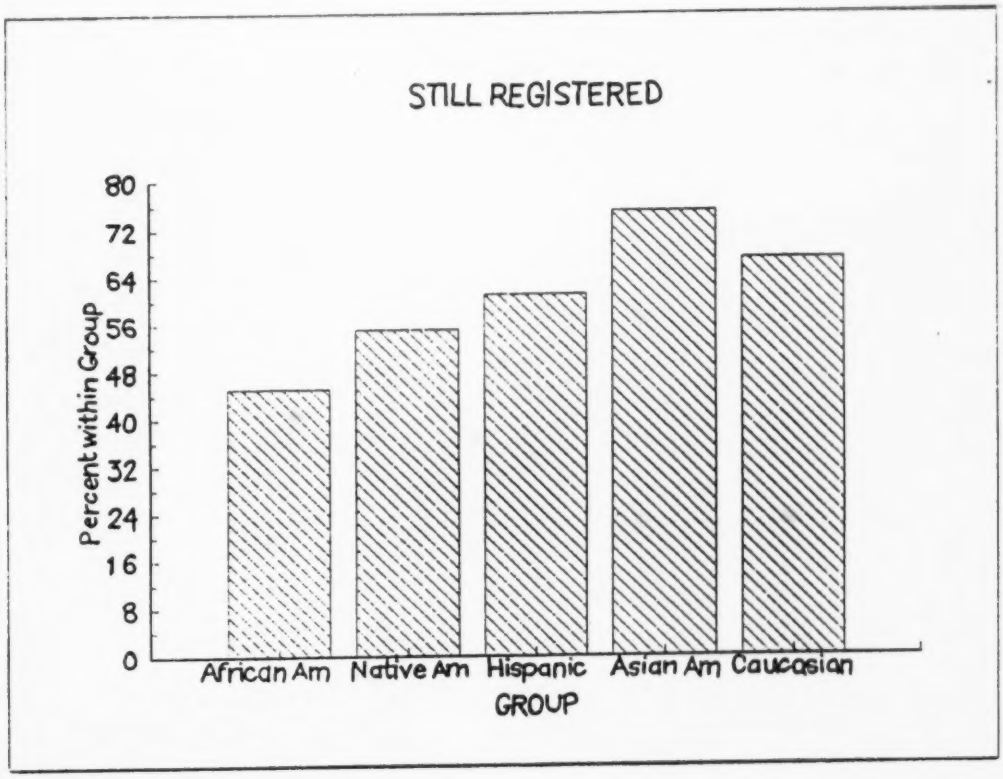
Students Still Registered, Previously Considered Withdrawal

When ethnicity was cross tabulated with registration status, it was found that Asians were most likely to still be registered (75%), compared to 45% for African Americans, 55% for Native Americans, 67% for Caucasians, and 61% for Hispanics (See figure 4).

Overall, reported experience of prejudice and discrimination did not affect retention. However, for African American and Hispanic students the reported experience of prejudice and discrimination does significantly increase the probability of withdrawal.

Retention was lower for out-of-state students (56%) than for in-state students (69%). Retention did not appear to be affected by gender, whether students lived on or off-campus, or lived alone, with family or someone else.

Figure 4



Students Still Registered by Ethnic Group

Recommendations

Studies have indicated that a multi-faceted approach to retention is most effective for ethnic minority students. Attention should be paid to academic performance, tutorial programs,

social integration and support, peer counseling, support from the campus community, and skilled ethnic minority advisors (Fleming, 1984; Mallinckrodt, 1988; Suen, 1983; Tinto, 1975). Lewis (1987) reports that African American students have a positive attitude toward efforts to retain them at a predominantly white institution. He maintains that students need to perceive the institution as an inviting place and informal, out of class contact with faculty serves an important function in encouraging students to feel part of the campus community.

Based on the literature and the study reported here, the following recommendations were made:

1. Assess existing support programs for students to determine visibility and accessibility.

2. Evaluate curriculum to determine inclusion of cultural diversity material in coursework.

3. Expand and extend student orientation to familiarize new students with existing services.

4. Implement a peer counseling program or identify a peer "resource person" to facilitate retention and satisfaction.

5. Provide increased support services for older students.

According to the Associate Vice President for Diversity and Faculty Development at the University of Utah, several of these recommendations have begun to be addressed. (1) Special welcome letters were sent to all newly admitted minority students. A minority student orientation for incoming freshmen was held the Saturday prior to the beginning of classes in the fall. (2) Peer advising was begun through the Center for Ethnic Student Affairs. (3) ASUU (Associated Students of the University of Utah) created a new cabinet position and formed a Multicultural Board. The Multicultural Board sponsored a diversity week with lectures, panels, food and entertainment. (4) The annual Minority Student Leadership Conference will be

expanded. (5) Three minority students were selected to be National Leadership Interns in Washington, D.C. (6) Four of forty Kennecott Scholarships were awarded to ethnic minority students. (7) The Student Issues Subcommittee of the Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action Commission in conjunction with ASUU has launched a student effort to require a course on diversity for all students prior to graduation. The subcommittee has also reorganized a non-traditional students organization.

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